

Political whirlpool: some aspects of dismissal of Medvedchuk

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«It is no secret that the SDPU(o) has always been seen as a party that supports the state authorities. True, we support the authorities in whatever we deem necessary,» leader of the United Social Democrats Victor Medvedchuk told the Lviv-based daily, *Vysoky Zamok*, in an interview published on December 7, 2001. The interview happened to be his last one he had given as the First Vice Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament.

It would be logically to continue and refer to something the SDPU(o) does not support, but there was little to be seen in the present-day establishment that the SDPU(o) would criticize. For a while the party enjoyed the informal status of the «party of power». Even when it became clear that the SDPU(o) prominence in the power-broking circles had deteriorated into mere illusion, the party still remained loyal to the top power-brokers, sought to integrate into it and to keep the remainders of its earlier influence. However, gradually the «waterline» of the partisan «ship» of the SDPU(o) sunk below the level of political «waters». The SDPU(o) ship suffered bad damage that might prove disastrous for its capacity to move further successfully.

The political fortune has turned its back on the SDPU(o) lately. In this case, though, fortune was not to blame: the dismissal was a carefully planned action. Since Medvedchuk became First Vice Speaker as a result of the takeover of control in the parliament by the «non-Communist majority» in January 2000, there had been four attempts to dismiss him from that position, and only the recent effort, number five, succeeded. Below we shall discuss key reasons and potential outcomes of the recent dismissal for the SDPU(o), for Medvedchuk personally and for other political forces in this country.

On December 13, 2001, five parliamentary factions demanded that the parliament considered their question about trust to First Vice Speaker Victor Medvedchuk. The decision was announced from the parliament's podium by member of the Reforms-Congress faction Volodymyr Bondarenko. The names of the five factions in question, however, were not officially announced, though the factions referred to in the context included those of the two Rukhs', Yulia Tymoshenko's «Batkivshchyna», the Reforms-Congress and the Communist party. It was also possible that the recently formed faction of Kyiv mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko, long-standing rival of the SDPU(o) leaders, was somehow involved in reducing Medvedchuk's influence.

On December 13, leader of the «Batkivshchyna» faction Oleksandr Turchynov announced that over 230 MPs had been prepared to dismiss Medvedchuk. Over 200 signatures in support of the action had been collected in the parliament within two or three weeks. The process got an extra push when the Communists decided it was their objective too.

The resolution «On Dismissing Victor Medvedchuk from the Position of the First Vice Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine» was supported by 234 MPs, with 50 votes against, 3 abstentions and 109 MPs who did not cast their votes. The decision was supported practically unilaterally by the Communists (110 votes), the «Batkivshchyna» faction (21 votes); the Socialist faction (14 votes); Oleksandr Omelchenko's Yednist (12 votes); the Reforms-Congress (14 votes); the People's Rukh of Ukraine (14 votes); Petro Poroshenko's Solidarnist (15 votes), as well as 12 non-faction MPs.

The MPs who signed the draft resolution argued that Medvedchuk had failed to perform duly as First Vice Speaker, had violated the parliamentary regulations, allowed substantial shortcomings in preparing and running the sessions, often ignores opinions of his fellow MPs, and had failed to ensure effective interaction between the parliament and the government, the parliament and local self-governance bodies, and coordination of parliamentary activities. The claims, however, are but of secondary role: what matters is the fact of dismissal.

There were only 50 MPs who said no to the dismissal of Medvedchuk from his position as First Vice

Speaker. The «alibi» was chosen by members of the «Trudova Ukraina», the People's Democratic Party and the Regions of Ukraine, i.e., members of the competing nomenclature block «For United Ukraine», known by its Ukrainian acronym, «ZaYedU». The gesture could be afforded under the circumstances, as the «ZaYedU» leaders could be sure that the Communists and the right-wingers would do the job. The «ZaYedU» benefited both in the political (electoral) and business sense. According to Medvedchuk, «it's a fact that the «ZaYedU» block is a competitor to the United Social Democrats», as he put it in his interview to the Vysokyi Zamok. As the elections draws near, the competition, particularly for the information and administrative resources, is only likely to increase.

However, it would be too simplistic to explain the dismissal only in terms of pre-election struggle. In fact, that would reflect only a part of the iceberg of contradictions accumulated to date. The vote demonstrated the accumulation of critical mass of dissatisfaction of political forces, represented in the parliament and regional elites with regard the SDPU(o) and Victor Medvedchuk personally. That «critical mass» was mainly based on dissatisfaction with political and economic methods used by the SDPU(o) leadership – from efforts to keep the leading roles in the Ukrainian football to the influence on the energy sector, privatization and domination in terms of the access to top-ranking decision-making offices.

It would be naïve to think that Victor Medvedchuk, a top expert of Ukrainian political intrigue, failed to know about the collection of signatures against him. According to another SDPU(o) leader Leonid Kravchuk, «that question had been hatching within the walls of the Verkhovna Rada for a long time» (Den, December 14, 2001). Meanwhile, it is unclear why Medvedchuk preferred to let it grow and did practically nothing to avoid the predictable results. According to the official parliamentary regulations, he could have requested the right to report to the parliament, get the standard five days to prepare the report and try and change the situation to his benefit. However, he almost insisted that the parliament would vote on the issue of his dismissal, though he could not fail to understand what the results could be.

On December 13, the «anti-Medvedchuk» vote formed a peculiar temporary left-right «coalition», which, though, should not be overestimated, as it reflects only the joint attempt to make SDPU(o) pay what has been perceived as their political liabilities. The reasons for various political forces to join the «coalition» were different. Something of the kind, but with different personalities involved, could be observed in the case of dismissal of Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko by the Communist-oligarchic majority in April 2001. The similarity did not go unnoticed in the parliament: for instance, Speaker Ivan Pliushch noted that the two dismissals had followed the same scenario: «if one compares [them], the scenario here is the same» (UNIAN, December 13, 2001). Hence, there is no need to guess about the future of the temporary «liaison of Communists and nationalists», as the statement of the SDPU(o) put it.

For the Nasha Ukraina block, represented in the parliament by the Party of Reforms and Order, the two Rukhs and the Solidarnist, the dismissal was sort of political vengeance for the dismissal of Yushchenko on April 26, in which Victor Medvedchuk had played far from the last role. For instance, member of the Reforms-Congress Volodymyr Filenko MP unequivocally stated that «to a large extent» Medvedchuk's dismissal could be an act of revenge for ousting Yushchenko. The indirect «champion of the game», leader of Nasha Ukraina Victor Yushchenko noted that the dismissal was primarily «a political decision made by a political institution, the parliament» (UNIAN, December 14, 2001).

The Ukrainian left-wingers, represented by the Communists and the Socialists, could not forgive the SDPU(o) leader for his key role in the «velvet revolution» of January 2000, in which they lost their leadership of the parliament and ability to influence decision-making and voting. Similarly, Leonid Kravchuk rather symbolically referred to the results of the «anti-Medvedchuk» vote as «the echo of the Ukrainsky Dim» (i.e., the venue of the «velvet revolution»). Also, it is generally believed that the vote was a kind of revenge for Medvedchuk's role in pushing the Land Code through the parliament on October 25, 2001.

Commenting on the dismissal, Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz announced that «the Socialist party has always seen as illegitimate the change in leadership of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine that occurred in the Ukrainsky Dim. Hence, our vote of no-confidence to the mastermind behind that farce was predictable and consistent» (UNIAN, December 13, 2001). Communist Georgy Kriuchkov suggested rather philosophical conclusions of the resolution: «nothing unpredictable has occurred;

remember the vote on the Land Code, when everything and every one were demolished. Victor Volodymyrovych [Medvedchuk] clearly overdid it, though he is a rather extraordinary personality. Apparently, [he] had done his job and now had to go» (Den, December 14, 2001).

Other factions, too, had good reason to join the game. Yulia Tymoshenko's «Batkivshchyna» had a chance to compensate for unsatisfied ambitions of its leader and her election block. Oleksandr Omelchenko's «Yednist» could take revenge for the 1999 elections of mayor of Kyiv, in which Omelchenko had clashed with the SDPU(o), and tried to use the dismissal for the race for mayor next year. Other factions could see how the political business was done.

No doubt, the recent failure of Medvedchuk is seen by his competitors also as a failure of the SDPU(o) – with all possible consequences for political and business allies and competitors. The former may lose a lot, while the latter are likely to benefit. According to Speaker Ivan Pliushch, the dismissal of Medvedchuk «obviously, will have an impact on positions of the Social-Democratic Party of Ukraine (united)» (UNIAN, December 13, 2001). Though, Pliushch advised not to make conclusions in a rush, as «that may either add or take away something during the election campaign». Take away sounds more likely, under the circumstances. Such a scenario would be quite logical in the context of symbolic «announcements» of the front-runners of the race, the «ZaYedU» block. The scores became more than clear after the «ZaYedU» was joined by the presidential chief of staff Volodymyr Lytvyn and Prime Minister Anatoly Kinakh as number one and number two, respectively, of the block. As a result, the SDPU(o)'s claim for a role as a «party of power» became more than shaky, and the recent dismissal of Medvedchuk could be interpreted by regional and local authorities as a signal that the SDPU(o) might not be given the desired «administrative resource».

The December 13 event may have a negative impact on business interests of some SDPU(o) activists, with all the consequences of separation from power resources at all levels – from the access to the presidential administration to the regional and subregional levels.

A specific feature of the Ukrainian political style is coordination of actions and decisions with the Presidential Administration. However, some indicators show that this time it was not the case. Speaker Ivan Pliushch, for instance, «excluded» the possibility that the dismissal of Medvedchuk could have been sanctioned by the Presidential Administration, i.e., the President. According to Medvedchuk, «President Leonid Kuchma was indignant with what had happened in the parliament (www.korrespondent.net, December 14, 2001). He claimed that President Kuchma had asked him whether he had known about the possible dismissal and why he had not asked the President for help. Medvedchuk specifically stressed that Leonid Kuchma had nothing to do with the dismissal... However, the December 13 event is a vivid proof that Medvedchuk lost support of the Presidential Administration.

In this context there is another angle to the affair: the presidential elections of 2004, for which the current race is seen as a preparation and a test. The issue of the future presidential election raises the questions of creation of the «battlefield» and selection of a successor to President Kuchma. Separation from the parliament's steering wheel automatically denied the SDPU(o) additional chances to succeed in the 2002 race and, therefore, reduce their chances for 2004. However, specific results of Medvedchuk's resignation remain to be clearly seen in the parliamentary race.